



The Twelfth Knight

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Category: Historical

Description: Surprises abound in this new tale of Pride and Prejudice, in which Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth experience some exciting events a few years after their marriage.

Darcy and Elizabeth expect a small party for Christmas at Pemberley just their young son, Darcys sister Georgiana, and his aunt and uncle, the Earl and Countess of Disley. The unexpected arrival of the Disleys younger son, Colonel Fitzwilliam, leads to the reveal of more than one piece of exciting news for the family.

Later, while preparing for a grand royal ball on Twelfth Night, Darcy finds himself dealing with the inevitable: Georgiana is all grown up and ready to marry. But can the suitor whos captured her interest really be worthy of her? Can Darcy bring himself to let his little sister go, and accept that she is a woman grown who is capable of making her own choices?

Amidst family growth and courting rituals is the news that the Prince Regent plans to award twelve men with a knighthood. All of London society is talking about it, but who are these men and why have they been chosen for this honour? Download your copy of The Twelfth Knight today and find the answers to all these questions and more!

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Pemberley, 22 December 1815

“Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth Darcy looked up at her husband, Fitzwilliam, from where she sat before the blazing hearth with their 18-month-old son Richard.

“Yes, my love?” she asked.

Darcy turned away from the window out of which he had glanced a moment ago. “Are you expecting any visitors? I know I am not, yet a man on horseback has just arrived before the house.”

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow, hoping that the excitement now coursing through her was as carefully concealed as she wished it to be. She was, in fact, expecting a visitor—one who would be most heartily welcomed by her husband once he was shown into the house. His arrival, however, had been a carefully arranged surprise, and she had no wish to give it away at the last moment.

“Odd that anyone should come,” she mused aloud, “given the weather.”

“Indeed,” agreed Darcy, as he moved across the room to where Elizabeth and Richard were playing with blocks. “The snow is two or three inches deep—if it gets much worse, my aunt and uncle will not come for Christmas, for the countess will not want to travel in bad conditions.”

“As well she should not,” said Elizabeth as the butler, Ralston, stepped into the

drawing room.

“A visitor to see you, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy,” said the man. “He is known to you but has asked me not to give his name. He said, and I quote, ‘Do let me surprise Darcy, if you please.’”

Again, Darcy glanced at Elizabeth, who again fought the urge to grin.

“Did you recognize the gentleman, Ralston?” Pemberley’s master queried.

Ralston nodded. “I did, sir.”

Darcy drew a breath and held it, then released it slowly as he frowned. “Very well. Let the mystery guest be shown in.”

“Very good, sir,” the butler replied, before turning smartly and quitting the room.

A moment later, he returned with the visitor on his heels, and as soon as Darcy set eyes on him, he gasped.

“Theodore!” he cried, an instant before he crossed the room to heartily embrace his cousin.

Theodore Fitzwilliam laughed even as he warmly returned the embrace. “Surprise, surprise, my dear cousin!” said he. “Are you happy to see me?”

“Happy does not begin to describe it, Theo,” Darcy replied. “It was my understanding you were to remain with the occupational forces in France until next year.”

“That was the initial plan, but there are some extenuating circumstances which demanded my early return to England,” Fitzwilliam replied. He then stepped to the

side and grinned heartily toward where Elizabeth was just standing with her son in her arms.

“Is that my dear little cousin?” he queried.

Elizabeth smiled. “He is indeed—which you would know, Theodore, had you not been away so long.”

Fitzwilliam approached slowly. “Now Lizzy, I get enough harassment about being away from home from my good mother, and I shall tell you as I have often told her: you know I must follow orders. Believe me, I’d have returned sooner could I have done.”

“Yes, I am aware,” Elizabeth replied in a droll tone, though she smiled as she looked at him. “Would you care to meet my son?”

“Indeed, I would—though I once again express some small measure of disappointment that you and Will named him after my father and not me,” Fitzwilliam said.

Elizabeth chuckled, then looked to her little boy, whose eyes were wide with curiosity as he stared at the man before him. “Richard,” she said softly, “this gentleman is our cousin. His name is Theodore.”

Richard’s gaze turned to her, then back to Fitzwilliam. “Cousin?”

“Yes, he is our cousin,” said Darcy softly. “You will come to know him very well, in time.”

“Greetings, little cousin,” Fitzwilliam said to the child. “It is a very great pleasure to meet you at last.”

“Pleasure,” Richard repeated.

“Yes, it is,” Fitzwilliam said, then he turned back to Darcy. “Speaking of cousins, where is Georgiana? Unless you have married her off since last you wrote to me.”

Darcy scoffed. “No, I have not—”

“Though not without some measure of effort to keep our sister single,” interjected Elizabeth with a laugh.

“Oh?” returned Fitzwilliam with a cheeky grin. “Do tell, Lizzy.”

“Allow me to have the nurse take Richard to the nursery; it is time for his nap,” said Elizabeth. “Then we shall talk.”

The nursemaid, who had been seated quietly in a corner reading a book, was immediately on her feet and crossing the room to take her charge in hand.

“I’ll send another of the girls to fetch the little master’s blocks, Mrs. Darcy,” said she as she settled Richard on her hip.

“Thank you, Hannah,” Elizabeth replied, before she lifted a finger to caress her son’s cheek. “You be a good boy and go to sleep after Hannah reads you a story, Master Richard. Mamma and Papa will see you later.”

“And cousin?” Richard asked.

“Yes, Cousin Theodore will also be here, my son,” said Darcy with a smile full of love as he looked at the boy.

Oh, how that expression melted Elizabeth’s heart.

When the maid had carried Richard out of the room, Elizabeth turned to Darcy with a smile of her own. "So, dear husband, how do you like my surprise?"

"Your surprise?" Darcy returned with some confusion. "You mean to say that you knew of Theo's coming?"

"Well, our surprise, really, Will," said Fitzwilliam with a grin. "I sent a letter to your charming wife some weeks ago to let her know that I would be coming home earlier than expected. Told her I should like to surprise the family."

"All I had to do was not say a word about it," added Elizabeth.

Darcy chuckled. "I ought to have known something was amiss," said he. "You've been smiling a great deal more these last weeks. I thought it was because of our recent news, and here it was all about Theo."

Fitzwilliam's eyebrows lifted toward his hairline. "Your news? Dare I hope to be told immediately that there is another little Darcy coming?"

Darcy moved to Elizabeth's side and slipped an arm around her waist; she slipped her arm about his as she looked at her husband's cousin and smiled widely.

"You do not hope in vain, Theodore," she replied. "I shall bear my husband another child in June, if mine and the midwife's calculations are correct. I daresay when my sister Lydia finds out, she will demand the child be named after her if it is a girl, as her birthday is also in June."

"Have you not told the family?" Fitzwilliam asked.

"Not as yet," said Darcy. "The news was to be one of our gifts to them all."

“And you are another,” added Elizabeth. “I really am so relieved you have arrived at last, for it has been terribly difficult to keep your homecoming a secret from your mother more than anyone. You know how she worries.”

“Indeed, I do,” replied Fitzwilliam. “In every letter she conveys how deeply she wishes I would sell my commission and return home, find a wife, and settle down.”

“Well, you have done at least one of those things, cousin, which should make her happy for a short while,” said Elizabeth.

“A very short while,” said Darcy and Fitzwilliam in unison, leading them both to laugh.

“Now, I have been a terrible hostess,” Elizabeth said then. “Allow me to ring for some tea, and we can catch up while your room is prepared.”

“I should like that very much, madam,” replied Fitzwilliam with a grin.

In only a few short minutes, a tea service was before them, as well as a tray of cakes, fruits, and cheeses. Fitzwilliam was delighted by the tale of Darcy’s sister, Georgiana, confounding the young men of the ton the last two Seasons. Her hand was much sought after, but Darcy—who was exceptionally protective of his sister after a near elopement with a scoundrel some years before—had only to look sternly at any of the young men who expressed more than a passing interest to scare them into giving up their pursuit.

Fitzwilliam laughed heartily. “Oh, come now, cousin!” said he. “You’re going to have to approve of one of them, eventually.”

“They are not good enough for her,” Darcy said gruffly. “And Georgiana is still a girl.”

“She is a woman grown, Will, if she has had two Seasons,” Fitzwilliam pointed out. “And as Mother has no doubt reminded you, if you continue to discourage any young man from forming an attachment to Georgiana, they may stop trying.”

“Good.”

Elizabeth chuckled and shook her head as she leaned to set her teacup on the tray before her. “Darling, it is not good to deny our sister the chance of finding a match as happy and full of love as ours.”

Darcy sighed and reached over to pat her hand. “I know, dearest. I do—it is just so blasted hard to let her go. She is almost a daughter to me instead of a sister, I have had care of her for so long. It is so terribly difficult to accept that I will eventually have to give the protection of her over to another and trust him to keep her safe and well.”

“I understand how you feel, Will, truly I do,” Fitzwilliam said then. “But as much as I sympathise, even I know that we must give her away someday.”

He looked at Elizabeth. “Is that why she is with my parents instead of here?”

Elizabeth looked sidelong at her husband. “Yes, and no. Lady Disley is, of course, guiding her in manners and dress, but Georgiana actually requested to spend some time at Disley Court because she and William had a disagreement.”

Fitzwilliam glanced at Darcy. “Dare I ask what the disagreement was about?”

Darcy cleared his throat. “It does not matter,” he said.

“Well, tell me anyway—perhaps I can help smooth things over.”

“I daresay you shall only be of use if you can convince your cousin to stop scaring off suitors,” offered Elizabeth. “This last Season, Georgiana was introduced to someone she liked very much, but William does not approve.”

Fitzwilliam frowned. “Why not?”

“Because his family endured a small scandal,” Elizabeth said.

“Small scandal?” countered Darcy. “I would hardly call a very public affair, a divorce, and an elopement a ‘small’ scandal, Elizabeth.”

“Mr. Bertram was not the one who had the affair or suffered the divorce,” Elizabeth retorted. “It was his sister who displayed such a terrible lack of judgement. And I remind you that his other sister is respectably married in spite of having eloped.”

“Mr. Bertram?” queried Fitzwilliam. “Not Tom Bertram, heir of Sir Thomas Bertram of Mansfield Park?”

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow. “Do you know him, Theodore?”

“Not intimately, but I do recall we were at Eton at the same time—he was a year behind me,” Fitzwilliam said, a hand scratching his chin. “I believe he was to attend Oxford after, and we had a good-natured row once about whether his preferred university was better than mine; as you know, Cambridge is a Fitzwilliam family tradition. As I recall, he was a bit wild, rather into gambling. Horses and drink were his greatest vices.”

“They still are,” Darcy grumbled.

Elizabeth sighed. “Husband, you know that is not entirely true. We have both of us spoken with Mr. Tom Bertram, and on more than one occasion. The terrible illness he

suffered the year of his sister Maria's unfortunate conduct led him to reflect on his own, and he no longer imbibes more than he ought. He has also curbed his inclination to gamble, though he remains passionate about good horse flesh."

Fitzwilliam scoffed. "He should meet our friend Edmund Hiddleston, if he has not already."

Elizabeth laughed softly. "Oh yes—never have I met a man more knowledgeable about horses and their related husbandry than Mr. Hiddleston."

The visitor was again silent for a moment, his expression contemplative, before he spoke once more.

"What of the sister who eloped? Who is her husband?"

"John Yates, second son of Baron Quigley," Darcy answered. "Gossip about London drawing rooms and clubs was that Julia Bertram feared her freedom being restricted by her father following Maria's affair with Crawford. As Yates had been courting her for some time, she allegedly decided that marriage to him was better than being imprisoned at home by Sir Thomas."

Fitzwilliam nodded, then turned to Elizabeth again. "Do you believe, Lizzy, that Bertram has changed his ways?"

Elizabeth nodded. "I do. From our conversations, I gathered that since his recovery from the illness that nearly ended his life, he has endeavoured to model his character on that of his father and his brother, who are entirely respectable. He has been diligent about learning to manage the estate of which he will one day be master, where before he cared little about it but what the fortune it earned could do for his pleasures."

“And Georgiana is genuinely attached to him?”

“I cannot speak as to how deeply she admires him, but I do know that she liked him very much,” Elizabeth replied. “Georgiana has corresponded with his sister-by-marriage, Mrs. Edmund Bertram—whom we also met along with her husband, Mr. Bertram’s younger brother—and she was hoping William would invite the couple and their brother to holiday here at Pemberley. William refused, leading Georgiana to seek refuge at Disley.”

“Why will you not give the man a chance, cousin?” Fitzwilliam asked then. “If your wife is willing to speak on his behalf—and we both know how much good sense she has—then why not?”

Darcy lifted a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose between his forefinger and thumb, which both his wife and cousin knew was a sign of growing frustration.

“Theodore, Bertram’s sister Maria had a very public affair with Henry Crawford only months after she married James Rushworth of Sotherton Court. Crawford, not unexpectedly, refused to help repair her reputation with a marriage—all he cared about was the chase, and once he’d had his fill, he was done with her. The story was all over London for ages, and it took nearly two years for Rushworth to be granted a divorce.”

“The poor sod,” Fitzwilliam murmured.

“Indeed,” Darcy said. “I do not doubt that some men can change—it is entirely possible that Tom Bertram has learned from his own and his sister’s mistakes—but if I allow him to court Georgiana, people will begin talking about her. I do not wish her to be subjected to such scrutiny, or to be associated with a family involved in a scandal.”

Fitzwilliam inclined his head, then sat forward and braced his elbows on his knees. “Will, have you not considered the benefit that being associated with your family—and my own, by association—will bring to the Bertrams? Yes, there will undoubtedly be some whispers about the previous scandal, which I imagine was within the last five years?”

“It was 1809, from what I understand,” Elizabeth said, “and Mr. Rushworth’s divorce from Maria Bertram was granted in 1811. I knew nothing of those events at the time they occurred, of course, but Mr. Bertram conveyed the history to me on our second meeting.”

“Hmm... And I was in and out of England so often back then that I hardly ever looked at a newspaper or paid heed to any gossip while I was here; that’s why I was unaware of it all,” Fitzwilliam mused. “In any case, while there may be some talk about associating with a scandalized family, there may be just as much—if not more—about how the Bertrams are distancing themselves from said scandal by gaining the notice and approval of so respectable a family as Georgiana’s. I mean, I assume that the former Mrs. Rushworth has been sent off to live out her days in the country somewhere.”

“She was,” Darcy said. “An aunt was dispatched to see to her comfort, but Bertram assured me that none of the family aside from that lady have seen her since her exile began. She writes letters to her mother and father occasionally, mostly to complain of her reduced circumstances, but Sir Thomas does not allow Lady Bertram to reply, and his only response is to continue paying her expenses.”

Fitzwilliam sat back in his chair and sighed. “Well then, Will, I daresay the family have all done what they must in order to preserve the respectability of the those that know how to behave themselves. If they’ve cut ties with the daughter, and Tom Bertram has mended his ways, I see no reason not to allow the latter to court Georgiana. And consider this: he will one day be a baronet and your sister will be a

lady of rank.”

“She is already a lady of rank, and could certainly do better as to a title,” Darcy groused.

“Oh, William, do not be so elitist,” Elizabeth admonished him. “While I do not deny that Georgiana’s beauty, accomplishments, fortune, and connexions are qualities that would attract a gentleman of rank higher than a baronet—and certainly some have shown their interest—what matters is what sort of man attracts Georgiana. And the only man who has truly captured her interest is Tom Bertram.”

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The screech that rang out an instant after Darcy's aunt entered the drawing room was sharp enough to make him wince.

A second afterward, she ran in an equally undignified manner across the room to throw her arms around her youngest son, whom she had not seen in too many years.

"Theodore! My darling boy!" the countess cried as she wept into his shoulder.

"Mother, I am a man in my thirties—hardly a boy," Fitzwilliam jested as she stood back from him.

Lady Disley lifted her hands to his cheeks and said, "I am your mother, Theodore Fitzwilliam. To me you will always be a boy—and when you finally give me grandchildren, you will understand."

"Frances, do give our son time to settle in before you begin haranguing him about getting married," said Lord Disley. The earl then stepped up next to his wife and held out his hand. "Welcome home, son."

Fitzwilliam nodded as he shook his father's hand, then grinned and pulled him in for a hug. The usually stoic Earl of Disley stiffened for a moment, a frown on his face, but he then relaxed and returned the embrace heartily.

While these interactions were going on, Elizabeth was greeting Georgiana. Darcy glanced over at the pair and felt his heart plummet a little.

His sister was studiously avoiding his gaze, which meant that she was still cross.

Darcy suppressed a sigh—and the urge to pinch his nose as he so often did when frustrated—and went forward to greet her as his cousin explained to the earl and countess how he had come to be in England so soon.

“Good afternoon, Georgiana.”

Her good breeding forced her to look up. Georgiana’s gaze remained cool as she replied, “Good afternoon, Fitzwilliam.”

“How are you?” Darcy asked.

“I am well, thank you.”

Elizabeth, obviously sensing the tension that remained between them, said softly, “Why don’t I go with you to your room, and we can talk while you change?”

Georgiana’s expression lightened a fraction as she regarded Elizabeth. “Yes, I should like that.”

Elizabeth smiled and spared Darcy a glance that conveyed her intentions clearly: she would share with Georgiana what had been agreed upon about her and Tom Bertram.

He still wasn’t sanguine about the idea, but both Elizabeth and his cousin had convinced him that getting to know the man better and giving him a chance to prove himself worthy was the only way he would repair his relationship with his sister.

Darcy knew he would do just about anything short of murder to make Georgiana smile at him again.

He did not see her again until she appeared in the drawing room before dinner. Elizabeth had told him while they dressed that hearing her brother had amended his

stance and was willing to get to know Mr. Bertram had lifted Georgiana's spirits. She actually smiled at him when she came into the drawing room, and after asking for a private word, she said,

"Thank you, Fitzwilliam."

Darcy resisted the urge to grimace and replied, "I am not sanctioning a courtship just yet, Georgiana. I have only agreed to get to know the man and his family better."

"That is a start," said she. "As I am certain Elizabeth has told you, I have been corresponding with Mr. Bertram's sister-by-marriage, who is also the cousin who was reared at Mansfield Park from the age of ten. If anyone should know Mr. Bertram intimately, she does. Fanny says—that is, Mrs. Edmund Bertram—that since recovering from his illness a few years back, her cousin is almost a completely different person."

"It is the 'almost' that concerns me, dearest," Darcy pointed out. "That and the fact that the family suffered a scandal. I do not want your reputation to be maligned by gossip because of it. Have you spoken to your aunt about your interest in Mr. Bertram?"

Georgiana arched an eyebrow. "As a matter of fact, I have. Aunt Frances is not entirely sanguine and agrees with you insofar as being concerned about the previous scandal. But she also agrees with me and Elizabeth that a person can change."

Darcy glanced briefly over his shoulder at where his wife stood with the Disleys and Fitzwilliam. "Elizabeth?" he queried.

Georgiana crossed her arms. "Yes, Elizabeth. Though I am fairly certain she has already expressed her views to you, I know that she has exchanged letters with our aunt and told her how you changed between the time she met you and the time she

agreed to marry you. Granted, Mr. Bertram's circumstances are different, but it is still the same concept, William. Just as you learned from Elizabeth's scolding, Tom's illness made him learn from his mistakes."

Darcy cleared his throat. "So, she has shared with you that I proposed to her twice—and how the first was a disaster."

Georgiana grinned. "She has indeed. Dear brother, I am still astonished you could be so foolish as to insult a woman's family while claiming to love her ardently."

Heat rose up Darcy's neck. "Please, do not remind me of my own ignorance. And you have made your point, as did Theodore and Elizabeth. I have agreed to write to Mr. Bertram after Boxing Day and ask that he be in London for the early part of the Season in January. I can give you no assurances other than that I am willing to listen to his side of the story."

With a sigh, Georgiana nodded. "And for that much, I am very glad. Thank you, again."

She started to move away from him, but Darcy reached out and touched her arm. When she turned back, he searched her questioning gaze and asked, "Are you truly attached to Mr. Bertram? You only met him three times."

The way the light in her eyes changed, the way her smile spread, told Darcy that she was indeed attached, though Georgiana's reply was "I cannot say that I love him, of course, though his sister's letters to me have said so much about him—thus I know him a little better than three meetings would suggest. But I do admire him very much, brother, and I am truly happy that you are willing to get to know him better, so that I may do so as well. Now, I must speak to Theodore and thank him for helping to change your mind."

“I have not changed it yet,” Darcy reminded her.

His sister grinned. “‘Yet’ being the operative word,” she replied in an impertinent tone that she surely had picked up from Elizabeth. Darcy could only shake his head as she walked away, wondering where the shy little sister of only a few years before had gone.

Dinner was a relaxed affair, in which Elizabeth delighted Lord Disley with stories about his namesake. The earl was quite pleased, though he expressed his disappointment that they had not arrived early enough for him to see the boy before his bedtime.

“I shall never forgive Philip for not naming his son after me,” he grumbled.

Lady Disley shook her head in that way she had when her husband was being ridiculous. “My dear, neither of our sons were named after you,” she said. “And Sophia was raised without a father, so it was natural for her to name her son after her mother.”

Lord Disley dismissed her words with a wave. “Oh, I know, I was just grouching for the sake of it. You know I love Julian even if he is named after his grandmother.”

“I should hope so, Father,” spoke up Fitzwilliam. “After all, Julian will take your place as Earl of Disley and head of the family one of these days.”

“Indeed, he will, Theodore, but not before his father does, and that won’t be for many years yet,” said Lord Disley.

“Our Father in Heaven willing,” added Lady Disley with a loving smile in her husband’s direction.

Fitzwilliam cleared his throat then. “Um, speaking of titles,” he began in a nervous tone that drew the attention of everyone at the table. “I have some news for you. It will, of course, be printed in the Boxing Day papers, but one of the reasons I have come home earlier than expected is because Prinny—that is, His Highness, the Prince Regent—demanded it. You see, it is his intention to reward twelve men with a knighthood for their efforts to defend and protect England during the wars with Napoleon, and apparently, my general nominated me to be one of the recipients.”

There was silence for half a heartbeat, before Lord Disley slapped his hand on the table and cried out, “Well of course, you are! Wellington is no fool—he knows a sharp mind and a brave man when he sees one. You were his most invaluable aide de camp!”

Lady Disley sniffed, then said, “His Grace should have pressed for more than a knighthood for our son—he is, after all, descended from an ancient and noble bloodline. He could have at least tried to get him a viscounty.”

Fitzwilliam laughed. “Oh, Mother! Why am I not surprised that a knighthood does not satisfy you?”

“Oh, do not misunderstand me, dearest—I am happy for you. You’ve given up so many years of your life for King and country, and your sacrifice should be rewarded,” his mother returned. “But really! Your father is an earl; you deserve greater recognition than a mere knighthood. He could have sought to get you a barony, at least, that you could be addressed as Lord...whatever.”

Darcy watched as his cousin chuckled again and shook his head. Fitzwilliam was reaching for his wineglass as he said, “Mother, I assure you, I take no offense at receiving a ‘mere’ knighthood. That my service was recognized by General Wellesley and His Highness is truly honor enough.”

“And I must say,” put in Elizabeth, “that ‘Sir Theodore’ does sound rather fetching.”

“Indeed, it does, cousin,” Fitzwilliam replied with a grin as he raised his wineglass in salute.

Lady Disley released a small huff. “Oh, very well. I shall get used to it, I am sure. But I do think I shall have a word or two with His Grace about getting you something better in the near future.”

Lord Disley and Fitzwilliam only shook their heads, while Elizabeth and Georgiana exchanged smiles. Darcy scoffed silently and found himself wondering if his aunt’s determination might just get her what she wanted.

It usually did, after all.

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Christmas passed with much cheer. The earl and countess, as well as Georgiana, were delighted with the news that Darcy and Elizabeth were expecting another child.

“I wonder if dear young Richard would prefer a brother or a sister,” Lady Disley mused.

Elizabeth laughed. “My lady, I daresay at his age, his only concern will be losing the entirety of our attention.”

Lord Disley snorted. “Indeed. Philip was quite jealous, at first, to not be the center of attention once Theodore came along.”

“Oh, I do remember that,” said Lady Disley with a chuckle. “If I may offer some advice, my dear, do what you can to include your son in everything, and be sure to

pay him as much attention as possible once the next little Darcy is here.”

“Thank you, Aunt,” said Darcy.

“Indeed,” added Elizabeth. “In fact, that was exactly my plan, Your Ladyship, and I am pleased to have my thoughts confirmed by one with more experience as a mother than myself.”

This praise led Lady Disley to beam a self-satisfied smile. She and her husband were then delighted to be left with the care of their great-nephew on Boxing Day as the Darcys went out to pay calls on their tenants and deliver baskets of food and other items they intended to give as gifts.

Much to everyone’s relief, the weather did not worsen over the next few days, making their journey to London relatively uncomplicated. Some of the roads were in poor condition, which made passage difficult for the horses and carriage wheels, and with Elizabeth being in a delicate condition and travel with a toddler having its own set of complications, Darcy insisted on stopping at an inn each night. Thus, the party from Pemberley did not arrive in Town until the first day of 1816.

Once she was settled in, Elizabeth’s first task was to write a letter to her friend Mrs. Bertram, informing the lady of their arrival. Letters had already been exchanged between the ladies regarding Darcy’s decision to give Tom Bertram a chance to prove himself worthy of Georgiana, and Mrs. Bertram and her husband—as well as Tom, of course—had agreed to make the journey in order to support the courtship.

My father-by-marriage , Mrs. Bertram had written, has asked me to express his gratitude for the change in Mr. Darcy’s stance on this matter, for though he met Miss Darcy only once last Season, he was delighted with her. He has said that he also had not seen my brother so serious about a young lady, which has made him hopeful of a happy future for his son .

Elizabeth had been entirely in agreement with the sentiment, and per Georgiana's wishes, added a few lines of her sentiments for a happy reunion with the family.

Especially Tom.

The reply that arrived about an hour after the missive had been dispatched included an invitation to dine at Bertram House in two days' time. When the invitation had been made known to Darcy, he visibly clenched his jaw and started to groan, until Elizabeth gently reminded him that he had agreed to get to know Mr. Bertram better.

The low groan became a sigh. "You are right, of course, my darling," said Darcy. "I know that I must keep an open mind, but... it is difficult to change such ingrained upbringing."

Elizabeth moved behind the desk in his study, at which he was sitting, to lower herself onto his lap and wrap her arms about his shoulders. After touching her lips to his temple, she said, "My love, you changed your ideals for me, and for our happiness. Be willing to change them for your sister's. Georgiana has confided that she admires him very much, and you must see that she's been more serious about Mr. Bertram than she has been about any other suitor."

Darcy huffed. "She has indeed."

"Exactly. And given how kind and generous a heart our sister has, perhaps you ought to consider that if Georgiana can see the good in Mr. Bertram, then there is proof that he has changed."

"Forgive me, my love, but Georgiana saw the good in George Wickham, as well, and look how that turned out," Darcy grouched.

Elizabeth sighed in frustration. "Fitzwilliam, I thought we had agreed never to hold

that against her. I even learned not to hold Lydia's foolishness against her when she fell for his lies."

"And they are both of them the better off that he died in the war," Darcy mused. He then released his own sigh and wrapped his arms around her, giving her a gentle squeeze.

"You are right again, my dearest Elizabeth," he said. "Georgiana's past misfortunes should not be held against her. And I know that she has grown and matured, and her judgment in others has vastly improved."

He turned his head and Elizabeth saw resignation in his eyes. Lifting her hand to his cheek she said, "It really is hard for you to let her go, isn't it?"

Darcy nodded. "It is. Pray we never have a daughter, Elizabeth, for I suspect I shall forbid her to marry until I am dead."

Elizabeth chuckled, then lowered her head to rest it against his. "Perish the thought—both of them. We must have at least one daughter, and you are ordered to live forever, or at least to live longer than me—for I cannot live a single day without you."

Darcy gave her another squeeze. "Then we must perish at the exact same moment, my love, for I cannot live a single day without you."

They sat in silence, holding each other so long that their breaths came in tandem, before Darcy sighed once more and said at last, "Do write back to Mrs. Bertram and accept her invitation. Tell her we are delighted to dine with them."

Elizabeth smiled. "I will do so at once."

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London was abuzz with talk about the Prince of Wales's announcement in the Boxing Day papers.

All that it had revealed was that twelve men would receive the honor of a knighthood—no names were given. Speculation abounded as to who the men would be, who their families were, and who all besides those men would be invited to the Twelfth Night ball at which the ceremony would take place.

Amongst the chatter was whether or not the Prince Regent's mother, Queen Charlotte, would make an appearance at the ball.

In the two days between their arrival and the night of the dinner at Bertram House, Elizabeth, Georgiana, and Lady Disley did the necessary shopping for new gowns befitting an appearance at a royal ball. Madame Le Blanc was, as always, delighted to take on the commission for the gowns, assuring the ladies that her seamstresses could have them done in time.

"They will work day and night if they must," she insisted.

Elizabeth had laughed. "My dear lady, I hope you will not stress yourself or your girls over such a matter as this. Take your time—if I must, I will have my maid make over one of my older gowns."

Lady Disley gasped. "Elizabeth, you will not!" she cried. "This is a royal ball—you simply must have a new gown!"

"My lady, there are but ten days until the ball, and I cannot condone forcing anyone

to lose sleep over making a dress,” Elizabeth replied. “Besides, I have a number of gowns which have not been seen in London, so to the rest of society, they will look brand new.”

“No, Madame Darcy, Her Ladyship is correct,” spoke up the modiste. “For so important an occasion as this, a new gown is required. However, I do very much appreciate your consideration for me and my girls, so I shall help you worry less with the promise to hire as many as necessary to complete these three gowns in time for the prince’s ball.”

Elizabeth smiled at her. Madame le Blanc was always so accommodating, and in truth so delightful to converse with during fittings. She knew that the seamstress took good care of the ladies who worked for her, and that they were paid better wages than some of the other dressmakers in town paid their staff.

“Very well, a new gown it shall be. I do like this one very much,” Elizabeth said as she pointed to one of the modiste’s own designs.

Madame le Blanc smiled widely. “Madame Darcy, how extraordinary you should choose that gown! I confess I imagined you in it as I sketched it.”

“There!” cried Lady Disley. “Do you see, Elizabeth? You were meant to have it.”

“Yes, Aunt, I see that now,” Elizabeth replied with a laugh.

“I hope that one day, a fabulous dressmaker like Madame—perhaps even Madame herself—will think of me when she designs such a beautiful gown,” Georgiana said wistfully as she returned to perusing sketches.

“Perhaps, my dear, when you announce your engagement, we may commission your trousseau here,” the countess observed.

“Oh, c’est magnifique !” cheered Madame le Blanc as she clapped her hands together. “I should be honoured to make the wedding clothes of Mademoiselle Darcy.”

Georgiana looked at her. “And I shall be delighted to have you and your girls make them, Madame. If only my brother will actually allow me to get married.”

“You must have many suitors, Mademoiselle,” observed the seamstress.

Georgiana colored. “I have met a number of fine gentlemen the last two Seasons,” she said. “But truthfully, only one who really made me feel anything for him.”

“Then he is a very fortunate gentleman, I am certain,” Madame le Blanc said.

“Most fortunate indeed, Madame,” said Elizabeth. “My sister has the dearest heart in the world—whomever she gives that heart will be among the most fortunate men in the world.”

“Oh Lizzy, you are always too kind to me,” Georgiana said with a smile.

“It is the truth, my dear niece; Elizabeth is only observing it,” said Lady Disley.

The ladies soon commenced with having their measurements taken and their fabrics chosen, and when they were in the carriage again, Georgiana said, “Aunt, I must say that I am surprised.”

“By what, my dear?” asked the countess.

“Well, you haven’t objected to my admiration of Mr. Bertram. You and my Aunt Catherine are usually among the first to wish to avoid scandal, and that is all that William seems to concern himself with.”

Lady Disley arched an eyebrow. “You are correct, Georgiana—I would much rather avoid a scandal than invite one—and given the unfortunate circumstances the Bertrams found themselves in near five years ago now, I shall be frank and tell you that I wish you had attached yourself to someone else. A gentleman of higher rank and greater fortune—and whose family was free of embarrassment—would be ideal for a young lady of your rank and fortune and connexions.”

She then drew a breath and released it slowly. “However... Despite my fastidious defense of the reputation of this family, I understand that love matches are the thing these days, and the heart wants what it wants. And I know that your dear departed mother would rather you marry for affection than connexions.”

Lady Disley then reached across the carriage and took Georgiana’s hand in her own. “Not to mention, dearest, that I only want to see you as happy in marriage as your brother.”

Elizabeth reached for Georgiana’s other hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “And if the rich and connected Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley can survive the shock of the ton for marrying a fortuneless country girl with connexions to trade, then certainly you—and this family—can survive any talk regarding the previous misfortunes of Mr. Bertram’s family.”

Across the carriage, Lady Disley grinned widely. “I must also confess that my husband’s sister has heard of the gentleman’s interest in you and has vehemently objected to the idea—which makes supporting your choice all the more appealing.”

Georgiana shook her head, chuckling as she did so. “I cannot say I am surprised, for I cannot recall a time you and my aunt ever agreed on anything.”

“Truth be told, neither can I,” the countess replied. “It has always been much more fun to disagree with her than to agree.”

“My husband would not be on speaking terms with her at all if I had not encouraged him to reconcile,” Elizabeth added. “Much as I disagree with Lady Catherine’s views and opinions and have admittedly been insulted by her numerous occasions of disrespecting me, I could not in good conscience be the cause of discord between them.”

“So, if Mr. Bertram and I should decide to marry, and my brother agrees, will you broker peace between us and Lady Catherine again?”

Elizabeth nodded. “If I must, and if you wish it—although I suspect if she were to be as abusive in her language of you as she was of me, your brother will have done with her for good, and you might do better to follow his lead.”

Georgiana drew a breath. “In this matter, as in many others, I have followed William’s lead and been happy to do so,” said she. “For I know he is older and more worldly, and more experienced in life in general.”

“But?” prompted Lady Disley.

“But I do not think him correct about Tom—Mr. Bertram. I know he is a good man; I just hope that my brother can disregard his prejudice and see it for himself.”

Elizabeth slipped her arm around Georgiana’s shoulders and gave a light squeeze. “I am certain he will, dearest.”

-...-

As the Darcy carriage trundled across London, Darcy sensed himself feeling uncharacteristically nervous.

The moment he realized what the strange sensation coursing through him was, he

questioned why on earth such a thing would occur, as he rarely—if ever—felt nervous. Elizabeth was the only person who had ever made him feel vulnerable, and then only twice in the years he had known her: when had proposed to her the second time, and when she had labored for their son. The latter, which he was loathe to label fear, he would feel again in about six months' time.

Tonight, he knew, it was about his sister. Would Tom Bertram prove to him that he was a changed man? Would the Bertram family as a whole be able to prove themselves worthy to be connected to the noble Darcy and Fitzwilliam lines in spite of the scandal?

As reluctant as he was to give the protection of his sister over to another, the gentleman found himself feeling a thread of hope. The sparkle of excitement in Georgiana's eyes as they had readied to leave Darcy House told him that her heart was much more engaged than she realized, and if he could not find the capacity to agree to a courtship, let alone a marriage, between her and Tom Bertram...

Well, he did not care to contemplate what the result might be.

When they exited the carriage before Bertram House, a gust of cold wind nearly stole Darcy's breath, and as he aided Elizabeth in alighting, he prayed that the Bertrams' butler was quick in answering the door. He did not want his wife or sister to stand long in the cold, especially given Elizabeth's condition.

"Do not be nervous, cousin," Darcy heard Fitzwilliam say softly to Georgiana as the four made their way toward the house. "I am sure the evening will go well."

"Thank you, Theodore," Georgiana replied in a distinctly nervous tone. "Both for your encouragement and your support. I must say that I thought you would be as adamant as William about refusing a connexion between myself and Mr. Bertram."

Fitzwilliam chuckled. “My dear, I have seen too much of the world to give as much importance to rank, reputation, and wealth as others do. It is not worth risking the loss of something truly special to let the past define our future.”

Darcy resisted the urge to grimace as he tapped the knocker against the plate; his cousin had said the same to him during their discussion about Tom Bertram when the former had arrived at Pemberley.

The Bertrams’ butler was indeed prompt in answering the door, and they were soon inside a wide entry hall with a large fire ablaze in the hearth across from the door. Waiting maids took their outerwear and disappeared with the garments in silence as the older gentleman led the visitors to the drawing room. There he opened the door primly and announced,

“Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy, Miss Darcy, and The Honourable Colonel Theodore Fitzwilliam.”

Mr. and Mrs. Edmund Bertram stepped forward to greet them with welcoming smiles. Darcy was not remiss to the look Tom Bertram, who remained standing by the fireplace next to an older gentleman, gave to Georgiana.

He is... happy to see her , Darcy mused.

“My brother Tom I know you have met, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy,” Edmund Bertram was saying, “but I do not believe either of you have met my father, Sir Thomas Bertram.”

“No, sir, I do not believe my husband and I have had the pleasure,” Elizabeth replied.

“Indeed,” confirmed Darcy.

Sir Thomas stepped forward and bowed, then when the Darcys had returned the

courtesy, he said, “I am very pleased to meet you at last. I have heard much of your family from my sons and my daughter Fanny.”

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance also, Sir Thomas,” Darcy replied civilly.

“It truly is,” added Elizabeth in a warmer tone. She then took on the office of introducing Fitzwilliam, after which Tom Bertram at last stepped forward.

He bowed from the waist, then said, “Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, for accepting my sister’s invitation to dine.”

Mr. Bertram’s eyes then moved to Georgiana, and his expression softened. He smiled, bowed again, then said, “My d—Miss Darcy, what a very great pleasure it is to see you again. You look as lovely as I remember.”

Georgiana blushed and smiled. “You are too kind, Mr. Bertram. You are looking very well yourself, sir.”

Mr. Bertram smiled widely, then he offered a greeting to Fitzwilliam. Mrs. Edmund Bertram invited them all to sit, stating that dinner was likely to be another ten minutes’ wait.

“And our cook is precise,” said Edmund Bertram with a chuckle. “The announcement will come in exactly ten minutes, I assure you.”

Polite, casual conversation had never come easily to Darcy, at least when among those he did not know well—or at all. He felt himself stiffening as the initial topic was the Season and who all might be seen in London over the next few months—gossip was his least favorite type of discussion. He felt himself stiffen immediately, and only Elizabeth’s delicate hand coming to rest on his arm helped him relax his posture.

Georgiana was, naturally, almost immediately enraptured by conversation with Mr. Bertram, but to Darcy's surprise—and reluctant admiration—the other man did not allow his attention to be solely on her. While he obviously continued to admire her and paid his sister every courtesy, Darcy had to admit that he was paying every respect to the family's other guests as well.

Only when Sir Thomas and Edmund Bertram began to discuss an issue regarding crop rotation did Darcy feel any interest in actively participating in the conversation. Mr. Edmund had just informed his father of success with the planting at Thornton Lacey—a smaller parish than Mansfield over which he obviously had some authority as vicar—the previous autumn, by having planted the crop in another part of the estate farm's fields.

“That was a wise decision, Mr. Edmund,” offered Darcy. “My tenants and I have found that rotating certain crops every year, or every other year, not only keeps the soil and plants healthy, but it helps to keep the pest disturbance to a minimum.”

“That is exactly what we have been working on, Mr. Darcy!” said Edmund Bertram excitedly.

“We have been working with our tenants at Mansfield Park to do the same,” said Sir Thomas. “Have we not, Tom?”

“Indeed, Father, though some of them have been unfortunately reluctant to follow our advice.”

“Why should they not listen to you?” asked Georgiana.

“It is because many of the families are led by an older generation of farmers, Miss Darcy,” Mr. Bertram replied. “And these older men are simply too set in their ways to see the value in change.”

Though the statement was in no way directed at him, Darcy could not help but feel the truth of it in his core. Not only because some of his own tenants had felt the same, but because he, too, had been reluctant to accept the change in Mr. Bertram himself. He had been reluctant to see any possibility for happiness for Georgiana amidst a family who'd suffered a scandal, and he had been reluctant to hope that society at large would have forgotten said scandal enough to allow the family—his, the Fitzwilliams, and the Bertrams—to live in peace.

Perhaps , he thought, it is time to be the instrument of that change .

At that same moment, precisely ten minutes after their arrival, the butler entered the room and announced dinner.

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When her husband emerged from his dressing room with his cravat still untied—and a gleam in his eye she knew all too well—Elizabeth shook her head and started toward him.

“Has Mr. Vincent suddenly forgot how to tie a cravat, my love?” she asked.

“Certainly not, madam,” Vincent replied in Darcy’s stead as he followed his master out of the dressing room with worn clothing over one arm, ostensibly to take it down to be laundered.

Elizabeth grinned at the feigned offense in the older man’s tone; it was a ritual that had been often repeated since the Darcys’ marriage, as Darcy had taken quite a liking to having his wife tie his cravats for him.

“I like the way you do it better, that is all,” Darcy said on cue.

Vincent huffed as though he were affronted as he exited their chambers, but Elizabeth knew he was secretly pleased to see his master in such a happy marriage and healthy relationship with the woman he loved. She reached up to the pressed silk hanging around Darcy’s neck and deftly began to arrange the tie in a perfect waterfall.

“Are you ready, William?” she asked casually as she worked.

Darcy snorted. “I shall never be ready.”

Elizabeth finished her work and patted his chest with one hand. “Think of it as practice, my dear husband. For I imagine it shall be ever more difficult for you to part

with your actual daughters.”

“Do not remind me,” Darcy replied gruffly.

Over the last ten days, he had made Elizabeth proud by adhering to his resolve to give Tom Bertram—and his family by association—a chance to prove themselves worthy of his sister. Elizabeth, of course, believed he was giving society a chance to prove themselves decent enough to refrain from gossip more than he was vetting the Bertrams, for Sir Thomas and his younger son and daughter-in-law had been ever so kind and welcoming, and Tom Bertram had been most attentive to Georgiana. He had called on her nearly every day, had taken her for a ride in his curricule, had promenaded around Hyde Park with her, and he had been most determined to dance with her at the two balls they had attended. He had escorted Georgiana into dinner at the two dinner parties to which both families had been invited as well as the dinner Elizabeth had hosted at Darcy House to return the favor of having dined with the Bertrams. This dinner had also included Elizabeth’s aunt and uncle who lived in the city, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner.

Sir Thomas was rather delighted to learn that Mr. Gardiner was the designer of every carriage he had purchased for the last ten years.

“Did I not now know that you were a tradesman, sir,” he’d said, “I would have marked you as a gentleman. You are so very well spoken!”

“Even tradesmen can be gentlemen, sir, though they do not have wealth and a large estate,” Mr. Gardiner had returned. “I believe that true gentlemanship lies more in a man’s character than in his fortune, residence, and connexions.”

Elizabeth had, for a moment, feared some form of reprisal from Sir Thomas; Darcy, too, for she had seen concern in her husband’s eyes. But the baronet had proved himself more evolved in his way of thinking than either had first perceived, for he

had inclined his head and replied,

“How very wisely spoken, Mr. Gardiner. Since the unfortunate actions of my eldest daughter, I have come to understand that it is character that truly defines us, not the connexions we have nor the number of pounds in the bank.”

It was the only time Sir Thomas had ever directly referenced his daughter Maria aside from a private conversation with Darcy that the latter had relayed to Elizabeth afterward. The only contact that he had with her was through his man of business, who arranged for her expenses to be paid. Neither his wife nor his children ever answered the letters she or his sister by marriage, Mrs. Norris, wrote to them. Sir Thomas had admitted to consigning those addressed to him directly to the fire in his study, unopened.

Four years later, he was still deeply ashamed of how his daughter had nearly ruined her entire family's reputation.

“Even now, the scandal hangs over our heads like the sword of Damocles, does it not? You hesitated, Mr. Darcy, to allow my son to court your sister because of it.”

Darcy, Elizabeth knew, had been unable to deny the claim.

In these ten days, however, his fears of Georgiana's reputation being tarnished by the association appeared to be mostly unfounded. Only a few whispers had been overheard in the ballrooms, and Darcy had once been approached in his club by a man who'd hoped to marry Georgiana himself. Given the conduct of the Bertrams since that first meeting, and Tom Bertram being in every way a gentleman to Georgiana, Darcy had been inclined to tell the fellow that he was allowing Georgiana to decide for herself.

In privacy, he had been forced to admit to his wife that, perhaps, he had been

mistaken about Mr. Bertram, for it was evident that the admiration between him and Georgiana had been building to a deep affection.

“He will be good for her after all,” Darcy had said.

It was now Twelfth Night, and the Darcys were preparing to attend the Prince Regent’s ball, where their cousin would receive his knighthood along with eleven other men. It would also be the event at which it was officially made known to society that Tom Bertram, heir to Sir Thomas Bertram of Mansfield Park, was courting Miss Georgiana Darcy.

“I wonder,” said Georgiana after Darcy had handed his sister into the carriage. “Who are the other men to be made knights this evening? Cousin Theo said he only knew two of them.”

Elizabeth released her husband’s hand as she sat beside the younger woman, then drew her legs in that Darcy could then climb into the carriage.

“We can only speculate, dearest,” Elizabeth replied.

Darcy settled into the rear-facing seat and the footman shut the door. A knock on the roof alerted the driver to start, and a moment later the vehicle was in motion.

“No doubt they are all of them young men who distinguished themselves in combat, as Theo did,” Darcy speculated.

“That sounds like what our cousin told us of the matter,” said Elizabeth. “The two men he knows are to receive honors this evening were under the Duke of Wellington’s command, as he was.”

She then grinned at her husband and added, “It is unfortunate, my love, that your own

contributions to the war effort are unknown.”

“His contributions?” queried Georgiana, her gaze flickering between them. “What contributions to the war could William possibly make?”

“Financial ones,” Darcy replied. He cleared his throat, then said, “In honor of our cousin, I gave a substantial amount to the war effort to provide weapons for our soldiers and, more importantly, funds for their families to support themselves.”

“Oh, brother, that is so very kind of you,” Georgiana said. “Especially your support of the families. I recall a breakfast at Disley Court while I stayed with my aunt and uncle where His Lordship made mention of there being some sort of difficulty in the families receiving the pay of the soldiers. Some of them were in rather poor circumstances.”

Darcy nodded. “Indeed. Soldiers’ pay is insultingly low as it is—there are servants in our own house who earn more. When Theo shared that some of his compatriots’ families were suffering because their pay had not been distributed, I found I could not abide it.”

Elizabeth smiled. “That compassionate heart of yours is precisely what made me fall in love with you.”

Returning her smile, Darcy replied, “And I shall forever be grateful that you took notice of it, though it was some time before you did.”

“Well, it is not my fault that it took me so long to do so—it was very expertly hidden when first we met beneath a veneer of pride and arrogance.”

Georgiana gasped softly and Darcy arched an eyebrow, though a moment later his expression fell into one of chagrin. “Perhaps I was a bit too full of my own self-

importance, my love, but you must admit that you were also rather too quick to judge and too full of prejudice.”

With a sigh, Elizabeth replied, “Indeed, I was. We were both of us fools, for a time, but thankfully we were each of us shown the error of our ways, and we understood each other at last.”

“And I am eternally grateful you did!” declared Georgiana as she reached over and gave Elizabeth’s hand a squeeze. “I have always wanted a sister, and you have brought so much happiness to our lives, dearest Lizzy. And though my Aunt Disley has been my sponsor in society, I do not know that I could have survived my two Seasons without you.”

Elizabeth squeezed her hand in return and smiled. “And I am pleased to have been of service to two such deserving people. Now, speaking of deserving people, let us not forget the purpose of this evening, which is to celebrate the achievements in service of King and country of twelve remarkable men.”

“But we won’t even know who they all are until after supper—that is what Cousin Theodore said,” Georgiana pointed out.

“No, Theo said that the knighting ceremony would take place after supper,” Darcy corrected her. “It is likely that the other eleven men to receive the honor were informed of it as our cousin was. More than one is likely to boast of it throughout the first half of the evening.”

“Quite so,” agreed Elizabeth. “You see, dearest, unlike your brother—who would have his kindness go unnoticed—there are some men who cannot help but crow their success for all the world to hear.”

“Tom is not like that—Mr. Bertram, I mean,” Georgiana said. “He has told me that

the severity of his illness, which he was most fortunate to have overcome, shewed him a humility which he had previously lacked. Even when others praise him now, he behaves as though what he did was nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Which is as a gentleman should conduct himself,” said Darcy. “One who continuously boasts of his achievements is no gentleman at all.”

The conversation continued on various topics, including what engagements each had lined up for the next couple of weeks. There were dinner parties, luncheons, concerts, the theatre, and even another ball to be attended.

“We certainly shall be rather busy!” observed Georgiana with a laugh as the carriage was drawing up to their destination.

“Upon my word,” was the next phrase she uttered, the words spoken in a near whisper with a tone of awe. Her admiration of the royal residence of Buckingham House was understandable, for it had been opulently decorated. Countless lanterns had been lit to guide attendees into the building, and around them were wreaths of fragrant flowers.

A footman from the palace approached the carriage to open the door for them. Darcy offered him a nod of acknowledgement before turning to assist Elizabeth and then Georgiana. Elizabeth took her husband’s offered arm and Georgiana followed a few paces behind as they made their way inside.

After divesting themselves of their outerwear and changing into their dancing shoes, the party of three followed the throng before them toward the ballroom. When they reached it, they waited their turn to be announced.

The caller, when Darcy had given their names, took a step forward and called out in a booming voice, “Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy and Miss Darcy!”

“I shall never get used to that, I think,” Georgiana whispered as they moved further into the ballroom.

Elizabeth chuckled. “Just wait until you are Mrs. Bertram, and one day, Lady Bertram—then, all eyes will be upon you.”

“Oh, do not say such things! I dislike being the centre of attention,” said the younger woman.

“Something you and your brother have in common, my dear,” Elizabeth said with a smile up at her husband. Darcy merely harrumphed softly and shook his head.

In only a few moments, the three were approached by the Bertrams. Elizabeth noted that though her gown was clearly made of fine materials, Fanny Bertram had chosen a very simple design. It suited her, the former thought—Mrs. Bertram had always struck her as modest and demure, and as averse of being the subject of scrutiny as Darcy and Georgiana.

Once initial greetings had been exchanged, Tom Bertram stepped forward and bowed again before Georgiana. “Miss Darcy, I must tell you how incredibly enchanting you look this evening.”

Georgiana’s cheeks colored a shade of pink that nearly matched her gown, and she smiled as she replied, “You are too kind, Mr. Bertram. And might I say that you look especially dashing this evening?”

Mr. Bertram grinned and held out his hand. Georgiana placed hers in it, and as he guided her forward, the gentleman turned and slipped her hand into his elbow and then led her away from their party.

“They make a very handsome couple, if I may say so,” said Fanny Bertram.

“They do indeed, my dear,” agreed Sir Thomas. “What say you, Mr. Darcy?”

Elizabeth watched her husband forcibly swallow. “I regret that I must agree with you.”

Sir Thomas and his younger son laughed softly as Elizabeth said, “I am afraid my husband is still acclimating himself to the idea that Georgiana may soon leave his protection.”

“I am certain I will be as reluctant as he when our daughter comes of age to marry—is that not so, Fanny?” said Mr. Edmund Bertram.

“Quite so, my love,” said his wife. “Though as she is but a year old, you have many years before the time comes.”

The two couples and Sir Thomas then followed in the wake of the young lovers, catching them up in only a few minutes as they had stopped to converse with some acquaintances. Introductions were made and dances solicited, and the cycle was repeated as friends and other associates were encountered along their circuit of the ballroom. They had just returned to the entrance when the Disleys and Colonel Fitzwilliam were announced, and so the Darcys and Bertrams made their excuses to go and greet the new arrivals.

“Sir Thomas, it is a pleasure to see you again. How does your wife, Lady Bertram?” Lady Disley asked after greetings were exchanged. “I do hope her health has improved.”

“I am most pleased to say that it has,” Sir Thomas replied. “As it so happens, I received a letter from Fanny’s sister Susan—who is my lady’s companion, you may remember—just this morning. She related that her aunt’s condition has greatly improved.”

The countess smiled politely. "How wonderful; I am glad to hear it."

"As were we," Mrs. Bertram said then. "It has made us all feel a good deal less guilty about leaving her for so long."

"I daresay your good aunt understands the reason for your leaving her when she has been ill," offered Lord Disley with a glance at Tom Bertram, who stood next to his father with Georgiana still on his arm.

The earl glanced at his niece and added, "Though you are openly courting young Mr. Bertram, Georgiana, I do hope you are not denying a dance to other young gentlemen. It would not be civil of you to ignore them."

Georgiana shook her head. "Of course not, Uncle. I am aware of my duty to our most gracious host and have my dance card already half full."

"You have saved me a dance, I hope, dear cousin?" asked Fitzwilliam.

She smiled at him. "Of course, I have. You know I always save a dance for you."

"If I may be so bold, Your Ladyship," spoke up Mr. Bertram, "I would be delighted if you would grant me the honour of a dance this evening."

Lady Disley's eyes widened in surprise, but she quickly recovered and exchanged the lifted eyebrows for a smile. "I should be delighted, Mr. Bertram."

Tom Bertram returned her smile and bowed, and then the attention of all was drawn to the top of the room, where His Highness the Prince Regent was then entering with none other than his mother on his arm, with first his wife then two of his brothers and their wives and one of his sisters and her husband following behind. Prince George helped Her Majesty Queen Charlotte to sit in one of the two throne-like chairs on the

dais that sat at that end of the room before he turned to the gathered throng.

“My lords, ladies, and gentlemen,” the Regent began. “Welcome one and all to this most glorious celebration of Twelfth Night, on which twelve knights will be created!”

Applause rang out across the room, and then the Prince Regent turned to the musicians on the balcony above and raised his hand. They bowed their heads and began to tune their instruments.

“All of you,” His Highness went on, “do enjoy the punch and the dancing. The knighthood ceremony will take place after supper.”

Again, the ball attendees applauded his words. The Princess of Wales, wife to the Prince Regent, then stepped forward and clapped her hands together twice. Those who intended to take part in the first dance made their way to the centre of the dance floor while the other attendees cleared it to gather around the perimeter.

The first strains of music soon were heard, and Elizabeth found herself for a moment swept up in the dance. After a few minutes’ passage, Darcy said,

“I believe we must have some conversation, Mrs. Darcy.”

Elizabeth grinned. “Is that so, Mr. Darcy? Then please tell me what subject most interests you, and I shall speak of it.”

Darcy mirrored her smile, then said, “That reply will do for present. Perhaps, by-and-by, I may observe that private balls are much pleasanter than public ones; but now we may be silent.”

A quiet laugh escaped Elizabeth as she recalled the first time they had had this very conversation—though during that first dance together, their positions had been

reversed. “Do you talk by rule, then, while you are dancing?”

“Sometimes,” Darcy said. “One must speak a little, you know. It would look odd to be entirely silent for half an hour together; and yet, for the advantage of some, conversation ought to be so arranged as that they may have the trouble of saying as little as possible.”

The bemused expression he wore as he spoke led Elizabeth to laugh again. “Oh, my dear husband... While it has been delightful to share these words again in jest, I confess that I do not like to recall how very much I despised you when first we spoke them.”

“And I do not like to recall how highly you praised that lout Wickham,” Darcy said.

Elizabeth shuddered. “Nor do I,” said she. “How blinded I was by the prejudice you mentioned earlier.”

She then looked up at him, and seeing only the same adoration in his eyes that she noted every time he looked at her, she smiled. “How grateful I am that you forgave my foolishness, Mr. Darcy.”

Once again, he mirrored her expression. “And how grateful I am that you forgave mine.”

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The dancing continued for some hours before supper was called.

Foolish as the feeling was, Darcy always loathed having to watch as Elizabeth danced with other men. She belonged to him , and though they were bound forever in marriage, he was not remiss to the appreciative looks his wife received. Of course, he could not really blame those other men for admiring her—she was stunning in the emerald green silk and satin gown she wore.

She would be stunning in a potato sack , he thought to himself as he escorted his most recent partner into supper. The young lady was, thank goodness, respectful of the fact that he was a married man and had made no attempt to flirt with him—two of his partners that evening had not the same scruples. Both had expressed interest in a “discreet arrangement,” which he could “certainly have no objection to” given his wife was “likely to start having her own affair” now that she’d borne him a son.

Darcy was quick to put an end to their hopes in no uncertain terms and firmly stated his belief in Elizabeth’s fidelity.

“Unlike some,” he said firmly, “both Mrs. Darcy and I are firm believers in the sanctity of our marriage vows.”

Both women who had attempted to entice him into breaking those vows had been returned to their respective parties in a huff.

Dinner was as pleasant an affair as it could be, given Darcy found himself seated too far from Elizabeth for conversation with her to be possible. He was, however, fortunate in that his partner, Miss Dutton—daughter of a friend of his aunt—was an

agreeable conversationalist, as was Mr. Edmund Bertram, who had been seated across from him. He found himself rather liking the Mansfield vicar the more he got to know him.

Speculation ran rampant throughout supper as to the identity of the twelfth man to be knighted that evening—no one seemed to know who he was. Those bold enough to apply to the Prince Regent for the identity of the man failed in their endeavours.

“He must be someone of excellent character,” said Miss Dutton when the subject had made its way into their conversation.

Darcy nodded. “I should imagine so,” he replied. “I had the opportunity to meet three of the gentlemen to receive the honour aside from my cousin before the ball began. They all seemed eminently respectable.”

“Your family must be so pleased for your cousin, Mr. Darcy,” said Miss Dutton.

“They are indeed—I can assure you that Colonel Fitzwilliam is one of the best of men and has assuredly earned his honour as much as any of the others,” Darcy told her.

“Oh, I am sure he has!” said the young lady beside him enthusiastically. “I believe my father is acquainted with your uncle, Lord Disley, for he has always spoken very highly of him. Surely such a man has an equally respectable and worthy son.”

“Lord and Lady Disley have two sons, in fact. Viscount Rowarth, my uncle’s heir, would have been here to see his brother knighted were it not for his wife being so close to her confinement with their third child.”

Miss Dutton smiled. “How lovely that your elder cousin is so devoted to his lady as to wish to be with her at such a time. I have heard it said that men often leave all matters relating to children to the women.”

Darcy inclined his head. "That is the way it has been for many years, Miss Dutton, but I can gladly say that Lord Rowarth is very much devoted to his lady and her comfort. No doubt his parents and even his brother would have wished him to attend tonight's event, but they all of them understand and support his reason for remaining in the country with his wife and children."

A sigh escaped the young lady before she blushed lightly and looked down at her plate. "If it is not too bold of me to say, Mr. Darcy, I wish very much for such a union with my future husband. To be truly cherished and loved instead of regarded as a means to an end."

"Do not despair of it, Miss Dutton," Darcy said kindly. "Marriages based on affection rather than fortune are slowly but surely becoming increasingly common. If I may offer some advice to you, make your sentiments known to your parents. Hopefully knowing your feelings on so important a matter will guide them in the selection of young gentlemen they introduce you to."

"You are very kind, Mr. Darcy," said Miss Dutton. "I believe I will do as you suggest, as the gentleman they introduced to me the other day did not appeal to me in the least."

When she gave a little shudder, Darcy chuckled. "I am sorry to hear it. Is your dance card full, Miss Dutton?"

"In fact, it is not, Mr. Darcy," said she. "The last set has not yet been claimed. Why do you ask?"

"Then may I inquire as to whether you have been introduced to my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam?" he asked.

Miss Dutton shook her head. "No, I have not."

“As your mother is an intimate friend of my aunt, I would have thought she would have arranged it,” Darcy said wryly. “For her son is single, as are you, and your family both wealthy and respectable.”

His partner laughed. “When you put it that way, sir, I am as surprised as you are that we have not been introduced.”

Darcy cleared his throat. “Pray forgive me if I have spoken impolitely.”

“Oh no, not at all, sir,” Miss Dutton assured him. “Truth be told, my mother is rather eager to see me married, as at two-and-twenty I am older than the daughters of many of her friends, and I cannot imagine she would be displeased with a connection to nobility, even through a second son.”

Again, Darcy nodded. “Then if you have no objection, I should like to introduce you to my cousin when supper is done. If nothing else, you will have a lively partner for the final dances of the evening.”

“I should be delighted, Mr. Darcy, for it would certainly be pleasing to have a lively partner over no partner at all!”

The grand feast ended not long after this discussion, and as it so happened, both Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam found him amidst the crush of people making their way back into the ballroom. Darcy quickly made the introductions and deftly exchanged Miss Dutton’s hand on his arm for his wife’s, leaving Fitzwilliam to escort his new acquaintance.

“Begging your pardon, Miss Dutton,” Fitzwilliam said, “but is your father Mr. Arthur Dutton of Amberston Park?”

“He is, yes,” she replied.

“By Jove, then, I am quite surprised you and I have not met until this moment,” Fitzwilliam declared. “My parents were speaking of your family only this morning, and I clearly recall mention of a daughter that my mother wished me to meet this evening.”

“I daresay, cousin, you’d have met her when we did had you not been called away to speak to His Highness after the first set,” offered Elizabeth.

“I am certain, then, that both of our mothers will be delighted that we have been introduced at last,” said Miss Dutton.

“Have either of you seen Georgiana?” asked Darcy then.

“She was not far from Theodore and me,” Elizabeth replied. “I’m sure she will be along in a moment.”

As though her words summoned her sister-by-marriage, Georgiana appeared on the arm of Tom Bertram, who had been her partner for the supper set. The gentleman was then introduced to Miss Dutton, as Georgiana had already met her.

“That supper was divine, was it not, Lizzy?” she said.

Elizabeth smiled. “I daresay the royal family spared no expense in acquiring enough to feed everyone.”

“I agree that it was sumptuous, Miss Darcy,” said Miss Dutton. “The roast duck was sublime!”

“I thought so as well!” cried Georgiana. “And that rice pudding was just the right amount of sweet.”

“No doubt Her Majesty’s army of cooks are exceptionally skilled at the culinary

arts,” offered Fitzwilliam. “I quite enjoyed the meal myself.”

The three couples made their way further into the ballroom, with Fitzwilliam and Miss Dutton splitting away toward the lady’s parents. The other two were met by their family members as the royal family were gathering around the dais.

“My lords, ladies, and gentlemen,” began Prince George when the crowd at last fell silent. “As you are aware, this splendid ball was arranged not only to celebrate Twelfth Night, but also to celebrate the elevation in rank of twelve very deserving men, who have done much in the service of King and country.”

Two footmen then appeared, one carrying a stool that he placed directly before the dais, and the other a sword that he presented to the Prince Regent with a deep bow. The prince then turned to Queen Charlotte and said, “With your permission, Your Majesty.”

The Queen lowered herself gracefully into the chair she had occupied earlier in the evening, arranged her skirts, then inclined her head. Prince George then moved to stand before the stool as another footman appeared—in fact, the one who had been assigned to announce arrivals at the beginning of the evening—and opened a scroll.

“The following gentlemen shall come forth and kneel before His Royal Highness the Prince Regent,” he called out, before reciting the first of the names.

As the ceremony proceeded, Darcy quickly caught on to the fact that each man was being called in reverse alphabetical order according to their surnames. He would have imagined it going the other way, but then what did he know of such things?

His attention was caught when he heard his cousin being called forward. Fitzwilliam walked with military precision to stand before the knighting stool on which each man knelt to receive his honour, first standing to attention and saluting before he bowed and then lowered himself to one knee upon the stool.

When both his shoulders had been touched with the sword and he had been presented with the insignia of his new order, Fitzwilliam stood, saluted, and bowed again before retreating to stand once more beside his proud and beaming parents.

The caller lifted the ceremonial scroll once more and called out, “Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

Shock held Darcy frozen for a heartbeat, before Elizabeth’s hand moved from his arm to the small of his back and gave him a push. Dumbfounded to have heard his name and not at all understanding why, he moved forward as though in a daze.

After he had bowed before the royal family, his gaze rose to the countenance of the Prince Regent, and he asked, “Your Highness, with the utmost respect intended, I must ask... Why have you included me among those to receive this honour? Why did no one inform me of it?”

Silence suddenly fell over the ballroom—not one of the men thus far had questioned why they were receiving their knighthood.

“The blame for your ignorance falls to your cousin, Sir Theodore,” said Prince George. “It was his suggestion that you be surprised, as he seemed to believe that were you to be previously informed of the honour, you would refuse it.”

Darcy glanced over his shoulder, and would it not cause the other attendees to gossip, he would have glared at his cousin, who was grinning like a fool.

Turning back to the Prince Regent, he said, “I cannot say he was entirely in error. I do not feel I have done anything worthy of such extraordinary recognition.”

“From what my son has told me, Mr. Darcy,” spoke up Queen Charlotte, “you saw to it that the families of the men in your cousin Sir Theodore’s regiment were supplied with the funds to support themselves, during that unfortunate period when the army

had such... difficulty in distributing the pay of the men in His Majesty's service. Is not seeing to the survival of those whom our countrymen defended not worthy of honour and recognition?"

"If you say it is, Your Majesty, then I cannot deny it," Darcy replied.

He then drew a breath, straightened his posture, and knelt on the stool as the others had done. The Prince Regent then lifted the sword in his hand and touched the flat of the blade to his right shoulder, lifted it, then touched it to his left shoulder. Darcy stood and was then presented with the insignia of his order.

He was now a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath.

When the medal had been affixed to the left breast of his tailcoat, Darcy once again bowed before the royal family, then returned to his own. The next man to be knighted was called forward as he reached them, though the disbelief he still felt at the turn of events led him to pay the continuation of the ceremony no heed.

"Now we know who the twelfth knight is, Sir Fitzwilliam," said a teary-eyed Elizabeth.

Darcy reached for her hands. "Indeed, we do, Lady Darcy."

She gasped softly. "Upon my word—I am to be Lady Darcy now, aren't I?"

"Congratulations, nephew," said Lord Disley. "Her Majesty was correct: Attention to those left behind as our sons went off to war is most certainly worthy of recognition."

"I most heartily agree, my lord," said his wife. "Oh, William—forgive me, Sir Fitzwilliam—your dear parents would be so proud of you."

At last Darcy felt an inclination to smile. "I like to think they would be, my lady."

Georgiana then came up to him, stood on her toes, and kissed his cheek. “Of course, Mamma and Papa would be proud! Oh, I secretly wished the twelfth knight could be you—for all your kindness to those families—when you and Lizzy spoke of it in the carriage. And it has happened!”

“Do you like my surprise, Will?” queried Fitzwilliam then. “Oh, you do not know how hard it was to get this for you, but the moment Wellesley told me he had submitted my name for recognition, I insisted on including yours.”

Darcy’s brows rose. “You did this?”

“I campaigned for it, yes,” his cousin replied. “Cousin, really—you do deserve it. Without your kindness, so many of my fellow soldiers’ families would not have survived to see them return. For that matter, those that perished on the battlefields of France would despair even in Paradise did they not know their loved ones had received some form of support.”

Darcy sighed, then looked down at the cross on his chest. “I... It still feels so unreal. I would never have expected to receive such an honour.”

“Yet the honour is yours, my love,” said Elizabeth with a squeeze of his hand. “And I agree, it is most decidedly deserved.”

After clearing his throat, Lord Disley said, “Now that all your family has congratulated you, Sir Fitzwilliam, I think it best we turn our attention to the rest of the ceremony. We would not wish to appear rude before the royal family.”

“Certainly not, uncle,” Darcy replied, as he turned to face forward once more, Elizabeth’s hand clasped firmly in his own.

Following the end of the knighthood ceremony and the resumption of the dancing, all the men who had received honors—at least, those who were not dancing—were

approached by acquaintances offering congratulations. Between sets, Darcy found himself standing before the Duke of Wellington himself, who had campaigned for his knighthood along with Fitzwilliam.

When he asked the duke why he would seek such a reward for a man he had never before set eyes upon, His Grace replied, “You took care of the families of several of my men when they could not perform that duty themselves. What honour greater than serving King and country can there be other than seeing to the health and comfort of those left behind? I read the letters you sent to your cousin on the matter—do not be cross with him for sharing personal correspondence, Sir Fitzwilliam, as I requested to read them when he claimed to possess proof of your worth to join him and the others in receiving honors this evening.”

Wellington paused and drew a breath, then added, “Men who serve in the army can barely afford to support their families as it is—upon learning that their pay was not being dispersed as it should be, they began to despair for their loved ones. A man who despairs is a man who is distracted and is a danger to himself and others on a battlefield. They were of no use to me or the alliance in such a state.

“Then, out of nowhere, the men seemed to rally. I had no notion as to why, but as we were amidst a series of tactical campaigns, I did not question it. And when Sir Theodore here heard me say I intended to recommend him for commendation, he adamantly insisted that your name be submitted as well, and when I asked him why I should go to such lengths for—as you said, a man I had not met—he said he could show me letters proving you were worthy of recognition.”

Darcy turned to his cousin. “You give me far too much credit, Theo. I only did what I thought was right.”

“And is that not the best reason to reward a man for his efforts?” Fitzwilliam countered. “For simply doing what was right—and not because it was asked of him. You offered to see that those men’s families were provided for. And I can tell that

each one of them would say that family is more important than anything.”

“He is right, my husband,” spoke up Elizabeth. “After all, we both know how important your family is to you.”

He smiled at her. “Indeed, it is, my love. I suppose, then, that I have no recourse but to get used to being called Sir Fitzwilliam.”

Elizabeth returned his smile. “And I shall have to get used to being called Lady Darcy. Oh, how odd it feels.”

Darcy nodded. “That it does. But at least we shall not have to get used to the change alone. Our cousin here must get used to being addressed as Sir Theodore.”

Fitzwilliam grinned and clapped his hands together. “I think I have already got used to the idea—I’ve had more time to do so, you see. I rather like the idea of being a knight.”

“Now all you need is an estate of your own and a wife to manage it, as Darcy—that is, Sir Fitzwilliam—has done,” said Lady Disley.

Soft laughter went through the group as Fitzwilliam rolled his eyes. “Mother, please. Do not speak of such things before His Grace!”

“Do not distress yourself, my good man,” Wellington said. “It is the province of all mammas to want to see their children married.”

The duke then excused himself, and each member of the family engaged for the next set went in search of their partners. By the time the ball drew to a close near dawn some hours later, they were each of them thoroughly exhausted.

“What a night, my love,” said Elizabeth wearily as she entered Darcy’s bedroom

dressed in a light sleeping gown.

Seated on the end of the bed in his own night shirt, Darcy nodded. “Indeed, it was, my love. Are you certain you are not too fatigued? In your condition, you must be careful.”

His wife sat down next to him. “I remind you, Sir Fitzwilliam, that I sat out more than one set to rest myself, so as not to worry you.”

Darcy slipped his arm around her shoulders and kissed her temple. “Sir Fitzwilliam and Lady Darcy. Who would have thought?”

“Quite so. Who would have thought that by the end of the ball, Georgiana would be practically engaged—”

“Don’t remind me,” Darcy interjected with a groan.

“—Theo would be harangued yet again by his mother about finding a wife, and you’d be the twelfth man knighted on Twelfth Night?”

“Certainly not I, my love,” said he. “Although I was actually the eighth man knighted out of the twelve.”

“Pish posh,” said Elizabeth with a tired wave of her hand. “You were the mysterious twelfth man, so it counts.”

The two then stood, and Darcy guided Elizabeth to her preferred side of the bed, He insisted on tucking her in before rounding the bed and joining her under the counterpane. They wrapped their arms around each other and sighed in tandem.

Some minutes later, a soft giggle startled Darcy from a doze. “Elizabeth?”

“Forgive me, my love,” said she. “I’ve merely just considered that I shall be writing to my mother this afternoon about the ball—you may recall she demanded I tell her of the latest fashions—and I can just imagine her reaction when she reads the part about you being knighted.”

Darcy groaned, then drew her closer. “Must you tell her at all? You know how she fawns over me now as it is—knowing I am knighted will only make matters worse.”

“Yes, my love, I must tell her,” Elizabeth replied. “It cannot be avoided. Now, do close your eyes again, fair knight, and go to sleep.”

A smile graced his lips and Darcy kissed her softly. “The same to you, fair lady. Good night, my love.”